

December 25, 2007

## It's a Wonderful Life

How Amelia made her wish come true

Today is Christmas, but already Amelia Guillen is looking forward to next year's holiday. A year from now, she'll roast a holiday *pernil* in her own kitchen. A year from now, her two children will unwrap presents from the Three Wise Men in their own living room. A year from now, Amelia Guillen, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who didn't understand a word of English, who barely had a *peso* to her name when she landed at Logan Airport, will own her very own house.

It will be a home in Lynn, far from San Cristoba, the rural village where she grew up two hours from Santa Domingo. It will be bigger than the childhood home made from palm trees she shared with her nine brothers and sisters. Her father labored on a plantation and her mother grew mangos, avocados and cherries that she sold at a food stand. The family was poor; and after her flip-flops broke, Amelia walked barefoot.

The villagers in San Cristoba often talked of America. Every platitude about the country was believed wholly, every myth embraced as truth. America was the land of plenty, of opportunity, of riches waiting for anyone who worked hard. When Amelia's father, tired of struggling on the pennies of a field hand, left his wife, who was afraid of flying, to pursue prosperity for his family in Boston, Amelia, then 27, soon followed. They got jobs earning \$5 an hour at the Barry Shoe Factory in Lynn, known to employ many Latino immigrants in the area. Amelia also cleaned houses. And she cried a lot. She missed home, the food, her friends. Life in the United States was not the dream she had imagined. The land of opportunity was expensive, and there were not riches waiting, even for a young woman who worked as hard as she did. She wanted to go to college, make something of herself, but school was expensive, too. How could she save any money on such meager pay?

Then, two years ago, Amelia met Sherry Riva, the founder and executive director of Compass Working Capital, a nonprofit in Lynn that teaches families how to save money and build assets—how to own a home, open a small business, graduate with a degree. Sherry started Compass after running a homeless shelter, Jubilee, in Seattle, another phase in a career dedicated to helping the impoverished, which she began when she studied religion with Cornel West at Princeton University. She believes that with the proper money-management training and matched savings, lower income families can break out of poverty. Compass cannot accept everyone, just those committed to improving their lives. When Amelia met Sherry, she told her how she walked to school without shoes back in the Dominican Republic until she finished her high school degree. She explained how she told her son and daughter each night that they needed to go to college, that it means a better life. She described the home she would like to buy for her family someday. Sherry accepted Amelia as a Compass client.

Today, Amelia will celebrate Christmas with her father and children. They will cook together all day. Tomorrow, she will go to work as a teacher's aid in the Lynn Public Schools, and earn a salary that will be put in a special savings account for a family home. Tomorrow, her son, Jency, 13, who wants to be a lawyer someday, and daughter, Jeniffer, 10, who would like to be a doctor, will attend the KIPP Academy, considered one of the strongest public charter schools in the state.

And next Christmas, thanks to Compass and Sherry Riva, Amelia Guillen can tell all her friends in the Dominican Republic that the myth of America is true, that there is opportunity and plenty, that the dream is alive. And they will believe her because she will be living it.

**PROFILE**

AMELIA GUILLEN



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